# [Mrs. Ella Johnson]

[?] New York City Duplicates folklore and customs tables # 12 [314?]

**FOLKLORE** 

**NEW YORK** 

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER DOROTHY WEST

ADDRESS 131 W. 110th St., New York

DATE October 20, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ELLA JOHNSON - GAMES

1. Date and time of interview

October 20, 1938 - 1-4 PM

2. Place of Interview

Home of informant's daughter

3. Name and address of informant

Mrs. Ella Johnson - 488 St. Nicholas Ave.

4. Name and address of person, if any who put you in touch with informant.

Known to interviewer

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

None

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Neighborhood in mid-Harlem, opposite park which extends from 129th to 141st along St. Nicholas Avenue. Interview held in conventionally furnished living room: easy chairs, cabinet radio, diven and bookcase. View of City College from living room window.

[315?]

**FOLKLORE** 

**NEW YORK** 

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER DOROTHY WEST

ADDRESS NEW YORK CITY

DATE OCTOBER 20, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ELLA JOHNSON GAMES

1. Ancestry

American Negro of southern parentage

2. Place and date of birth

Camden, S. C. Informant is about 60 years old.

3. Family

Married daughter lives in New York, where Mrs, Johnson, whose home is in Boston, has been visiting.

4. Places lived in, with dates

Camden, S. C, and Springfield, Mass., and Boston where informant has lived for the past 30 years.

5. Education with dates

Very probably Grammar school only has been self-supporting since girlhood.

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Practical nurse.

7. Special skills and interests

Knitting and nature study.

8. Community and religious activities

Attends church regularly and elongs to a Bible Society.

9. Description of informant

Small, brown, pleasant faced, gray-haired woman. Dresses well, and is in good physical condition.

10. Other Points gained in interview

Informant has recently become interested in photography and intends to develop it as a hobby.

**FOLKLORE** 

**NEW YORK** 

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER DOROTHY WEST

ADDRESS NEW YORK CITY

DATE OCTOBER 20, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ELLA JOHNSON - GAMES.

1.

We used to play what we called the Prisoners Game - there were a thousand of us so we didn't have to play with anybody else. Anyhow, we weren't allowed to play with anybody else. (Informant was one of twelve children).

We'd form a circle and hold hands. One child was put in the center, and that child was in prison. Maybe the one in the center of the circle asked to be the prisoner, maybe we'd count off and whoever was last was in the center, or maybe we'd do something else to

get the prisoner. I don't remember all the things we used to do. Well, the one in the center would try to get out of prison. If he thought we weren't holding hands tight, he'd run up and try to break through two people. After he'd tried that for a while, then he'd go and stand in front of a couple, sort of in-between them, and say:

Prisoner: "Is this door looked?"

Couple: "Hard and fast!"

Prisoner: "Can I get out of here?"

Couple: "No."

He kept this up, asking and trying to break out, until he did get out. Then he got chased. The one who caught the prisoner went in the center, and that's all there was to it. You started playing all over again and played 'till you got tired.

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2

We played another game that went like this:

You'd have two groups of children who were baboons. Then you had two children who stood on base. One base was here, say, (she gestured toward one corner of the room) and the other was there (she pointed to the other side of the room).

One child on base would talk to the other, saying:

First child: "How many miles to London Bridge?"

Second child: "Three score and ten."

First child: "Can I get there by candle-light?"

Second child: "If your legs are long as life."

First child: "Look out the baboons don't catch you."

As soon as they got through saying that, they'd light out and run. The two groups who were the baboons would chase them. The idea was for the two on base to exchange bases, and the baboons were 'suposed to catch them while they were running to the other base. If a baboon caught you, then he'd take your base and you'd join the baboons.

We used to play a game called "What Your Mother Tell You To Do?" This was a more quiet game and you could play in the house 'cause there wasn't all that running to do that you did in the other two games.

You sat around in a circle or in a semi-circle with a leader who sat in front facing you. Then you talked back and forth, and did what the leader did.

Group: What did my mama tell me to do?"

Leader: "To knock one hammer like you see me for do."

Then you knocked your first fist in the palm of your hand like a hammer.

Group: "What did my mama tell me to do?"

Leader: "Me knock two hammers like you see me for do."

Then you hammered on your knees with both fists.

Group: "What did my mama tell me to do?"

Leader: To knock three hammers like you see me for do." 3 Then you knocked both fists on your knees and patted one foot.

Group: "What did my mama tell me to do?"

Leader: "To knock four hammers like you see me for do."

Then you knocked both fists on you knees and patted both feet.

Group: "What did my mama tell me to do?"

Leader: "To knock five hammers like you see me for do."

Then you knocked both fists, both feet and nodded your head up and down.

Group: "What did my mother tell me to do?"

Leader: To knock all hammers like you see me for do."

Then you let go and knocked your fists, your feet and jiggled your head up and down in rhythm with the words until all parts of your body were moving.

We had a "joggling board." It was a long, resilient board that was pegged down to two end foundations. We children used to get on the board and bounce up and down. You could bounce by yourself, or with as many as the board would hold. (From the description of the "joggling board", it seems somewhat comparable to the "teeter boards" which consisted of a long, somewhat resilient plank of wood but which rested on a wooden horse placed at its center rather than on a horse at either end.

There was a dance some of the children used to do. I don't know whether I remember the words or not, but I remember one little girl used to say,

"Put my head in a crocus sack,

And teach you folks to Karo-back."

The Karo was a dance and when you said those words, or some like them, you took one step forward and then danced backward on one foot.

Here's a little ditty the girls used to say. When they said it, they twitched their skirts.

4

"The rice-crust suits my mind so well,

Don't tell the boys I eat it."

A rice crust is the layer or coating that sticks to the pan. Instead of throwing it away, some people like to eat it. Especially children.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\* [320?]

**FOLKLORE** 

**NEW YORK** 

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER DOROTHY WEST

ADDRESS NEW YORK CITY

DATE October 20, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW WITH MRS. ELLA JOHNSON - GAMES.

The informant is quite willing and interested to recall the games which she played when she was a child. The most interesting of her comments was that she and her sisters and

brothers were not allowed to play with other children in the neighborhood. This was and still is typical of many Negro parents' authority in the South. In keeping with this, the informant stated that she and her brothers and sisters were sent to a private school rather than to the public school where they would come in contact with and find opportunity to make friends generally with the other children in the community.

Whereas Mrs. Johnson come from a localized culture, and no doubt had many folk traits when she reached the North, she is now so urbanized that there was very little in the three hour interview except the games which was worth recording as folk material. These exceptions themselves (#V and VI) were slight.